Our world is portrayed as if it is in shambles. Every day there is a different news story about violence, conflict and friction. Too often the violence that is depicted leads the viewer to believe that this is something inevitable. It is not. Many of these violent news stories feature Muslims and Jews, and highlight the differences between the communities as well as the latest violent act that served to divide them more. The media believes that there is nothing but friction between Muslim and Jewish communities. There is a plethora of stories highlighting differences and a distinct lack of stories about positivity. The contemporary issues are characterized as all-encompassing, permanent problems that have always been there. This could not be further from the truth. Muslims and Jews have an incredibly vibrant and storied history. The two communities have thousands of years of shared, peaceful coexistence around the world. From the origins of Islam in the 7th century to the modern day, there are many examples of interfaith cooperation and peaceful association. However, amidst the current political and social climate, such heartwarming stories are often brushed aside for the latest terrorist attack or political statement. The Jewish and Muslim communities today need to understand that the contemporary issues that seem so important in the moment are just that; they are contemporary and temporary. The issues do not reflect the historical aspects of interfaith dialogue and cooperation. We are in desperate need of more positivity between Muslims and Jews. This is where my grandfather comes in.

My grandfather taught me about Besa. Not many people are familiar with this incredible Albanian custom, which my grandfather learned about while conducting research at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. Simply put, Besa is an Albanian cultural tradition similar to ‘guest right.’ It holds that it is your obligation to help someone in need. Put more
complexly, Besa is a cultural tradition that single-handedly led to the saving of over 2,000 Jews during World War II. Besa has also served as the inspiration for my grandfather, Norman, and his award-winning photo series, book, and documentary film.

Muslims and Jews have coexisted for millennia. Prior to the life of Muhammad in the 7th century and the establishment of Islam, Jews and Arabs had lived together in the Middle East for thousands of years. By the time Islam emerged, there were many well-established Jewish communities across the Middle East. Throughout the rise and fall of various nation-states in the region, Jews existed relatively peacefully. While there was discrimination, Jews were largely left to their own devices. This is largely as a result of the Qur’an. In the ninth chapter, the book states that non-Muslim monotheists (read: Jews and Christians) are identified as “People of the Book.” These peoples were allowed to practice their religion as long as they paid tribute and accepted that the Muslim community was superior to them. Essentially, this rule meant that the People of the Book were citizens in Muslim society, with legal protection and rights. They must, however, pay a special tax and accept the social hierarchy that placed Muslims on top. These rules were applied to Christians and Jews equally. While the political situation left much to be desired, Jews in Muslim countries were often treated better than their counterparts in Christian Europe. In Europe, Jews were not considered citizens and were subject to humiliating and anti-semitic treatment from the Christian society.

Jews and Muslims continue to coexist today. However, the history has become much more frictional. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of colonialism and nationalism in the Middle East in the 19th century, Jews and Muslims are in a state of near constant conflict. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 only exacerbated tensions
between Muslims and Jews, especially among those Jews who were already living in Arab countries. Since then, the conflict has only gotten worse. There is no sense of peaceful habitation between Muslims and Jews, even though the two communities continue to coexist both in and outside Israel. The popular perception is that the current conflict is thousands of years old. The claim is that, at its roots, the enmity between Jews and Arabs has biblical origins. This is a blatant falsehood and discounts the vast history of the two communities. It also discounts the wonderful Albanian custom of Besa, which drove thousands of Muslims to rescue thousands of Jews during World War II.

This story is truly remarkable. My grandfather first discovered it while conducting research at Yad Vashem in Israel. He learned that during WWII, amidst the German occupation of Albania, not one Jewish man, woman or child was given up to the Nazis. At the time, Albania was one of the only Muslim-majority states in Europe. This makes it even more remarkable that the Albanians resisted the persecution efforts by the Nazis on such an astonishing scale. While other countries, such as Denmark, resisted the Nazis, Albania was the only nation where the entire country worked together to save refugees. The numbers are incredible. After the war, the Albanian-Jewish population was ten-times what it had been in the pre-war years, the community having grown from 200 to over 2,000 people. My grandfather saw this incredible story and thought “this is a story the world needs to hear.” It is especially important because it has lain dormant for over 50 years under the repressive communist veil that descended over Albania. During the war, the Albanian government was so complicit in the saving of Jews that then king, Zog I, a devout Muslim, sent a message to his people. “All Jewish children will [be welcomed],
all will eat the same food, all will live as one family.” He instructed his border guards to allow all Jewish refugees into the country without opposition.

The custom that motivated the tiny country of Albania to open their hearts and doors is called Besa. Besa is Albania’s greatest export. The tradition is a code of honor which means that if someone comes to you in need of assistance, you are obligated to help them. You must give them your Besa and bring them under your protection. A common Albanian saying is that “we would sooner have our son killed, then break our Besa.” The Albanians gave every Jew that they encountered their Besa. They protected them, often with their lives. A particularly striking story that I learned from my grandfather’s project tells of an Albanian man whose father had sheltered Jews. The father said that “it was his privilege and honor to help the Jewish people,” whom he considered their guests. The father believed that it gave him an opportunity to practice his Islamic faith and his Besa.

There were so many heroic stories that my grandfather learned about during his travels to Albania. One family had given up their entire house so that several Jewish families could move into it, placing themselves at risk and putting their family out on the street. Another man, who was a local doctor, saved the lives of many Jews by giving them much-needed medical services. When the Nazis came to his door, the doctor would shout “Get out of here! These are my patients. I’m a doctor!” The Nazis left him alone. One Muslim man’s father had housed several Jewish families during the war. As the Nazis occupied his country, the father knew that he had to help them. He needed to move them to another village, as the Nazis were going house-to-house, door-to-door, with dogs, looking for Jews. The Jewish children began to sob, as they did not want to leave the safe place they were in. The man’s father knelt down and hugged one of the
children. “Safety is everywhere,” he said. “Wherever you go in Albania, the Albanians are there to protect you.”

The Albanian people took enormous risks to their lives and the lives of their families. They are incredibly humble about it, to this very day. When my grandfather was in Albania, many of the Albanians who were being honored did not truly understand why they were being honored. “Of course we did this,” many of them remarked. “Anyone would do this.” But, of course, not everyone would. That is why this history is so important to share with the world. It is incredibly important for people to learn about the heroic actions that so many Albanians did during WWII. They defied the Nazis and protected the Jewish people, often with their lives. They used their Besa to help people. Besa is an immensely remarkable concept, and we can learn so much from it in today’s world.

The lesson of Besa is especially important today because of the distinct lack of heartwarming stories between Muslims and Jews. There is so much focus on contemporary issues, such as settlements in Israel, terrorism and oppression on both sides. While these are all very serious issues, Besa has shown me that it is possible for anyone to defy stereotypes to do a good deed. Every person has the opportunity to save a life. When asked about his Besa, one Muslim responded, “First, my home is God’s house. Second, it is my guest’s house. Finally, it is my family’s house.” This message has the power to bridge the gap caused by the Arab-Israeli conflict. Besa teaches open-mindedness, tolerance, and respect. Albania has taught me that the world is full of good people, no matter their religion, nationality or ethnicity.

The core concept of Besa, hospitality and human kindness, can be applied in so many different ways to our modern world. With such a large focus on the negative, it is tough to see
the positive. It is so easy to believe that Muslims and Jews are simply incompatible. This could not be further from the truth. As I have shown throughout this paper, Muslim and Jewish communities have thousands of years of rich history filled with peaceful coexistence. In times of trouble, Muslims in Albania put aside their differences with the Jews and rescued them. The refugees were in need, so the Albanians helped them. There was no question of religion, or of incompatibility with their religion, country or lives. The Albanians saw someone in need and they helped them.

We have so much we can learn from Besa. Besa has taught me that dialogue and cooperation can provide the tools to solve almost any problem. Religious and political conversations are incredibly important. The world is not black or white, nor is it Muslim or Jewish. The world is varying shades of gray morality. Only through dialogue are we able to sweep aside our differences and realize that we are all people. We all have our strengths and our weaknesses, our faults and insecurities, our pride and sadness. We all love, laugh and live. There should be no distinction between someone who is Muslim and someone who is Jewish. If we can all learn to cooperate and accept each other’s differences, there is so much we can accomplish.

There are many groups in the United States and Israel who are seeking to establish and foster interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Muslim and Jewish Interconnections, or MAJIC, is one of them. This is a group on Northeastern’s campus for Jewish and Muslim students who seek to engage with their peers. The goal of the group is to learn more about the history, perceptions and personal experiences of their respective faiths. They host events on campus for students of all backgrounds to come together and foster meaningful interfaith conversations. Another similar group is doing the same thing, nationwide. The Institute for Islamic, Christian and Jewish
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Zachary Gershman

Studies, or ICJS was founded on interfaith dialogue and understanding. The organization wants to shape a new relationship among Jews, Christians and Muslims by tackling the contemporary issues of religious hatred and misunderstanding. ICJS seeks to develop resources that inspire members to honor the legitimacy and distinctiveness of the three faiths.

While the programs in the United States are helpful, there needs to be active organizations in the Middle East to address the issue ‘on the ground’, so to speak. Hand in Hand is an Israeli program, formerly funded by the Israeli government, that oversees six schools in Israel. In this school, every classroom has a Palestinian Muslim teacher and an Israeli Jewish teacher. The courses are taught in both Arabic and Hebrew, as well as English. In my opinion, schools such as these are the best way to combat issues of Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in the contemporary world. It is important to educate people while they are young about interfaith dialogue, as without it, it is easy to fall into the trap of ethnocentrism and the belief that your group is somehow superior to the next group.

It is important to foster organizations such MAJIC, ICJS and the Hand in Hand school. These groups foster interfaith dialogue and cooperation, which is vital to overcoming issues of religious hatred, misunderstanding and racism. These groups are using the same concepts that Besa expounds. People are inherently good, no matter their religion, ethnicity, nationality or any other defining feature. Besa is such a human story. Heart to heart, Muslim to Jew, person to person. As one Albanian woman said, “As Muslims, we welcomed all the Jews. We welcomed them with bread, salt and our hearts. That is Besa.” That is why Besa is so important today. We must put aside our differences and learn to love one another. This can only be accomplished through high levels of dialogue, cooperation and interfaith support. The Albanians practiced their
interfaith love, cooperation and dialogue when they rescued so many Jewish refugees. We must learn from them and apply their lessons to today’s contemporary friction between Muslims and Jews.

Citations

● [http://www.besatethepromise.com](http://www.besatethepromise.com)